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## RESPONSE TO BISHOP OLSON AND PRESIDENT TIPSON

Robert Benne

I would like to respond to two articles in the Winter 2002 issue of *Intersections*, which I found to be even more helpful than usual. All the articles are worthy of response but there is no space for such an expansive effort. The first article I want to grapple with is "The Marks of an ELCA College" by former Bishop Stanley Olson. I found his marks very helpful and I especially appreciated his examination of ELCA college mission statements. However, the section on "Christian Faith at Every Table" had some troublesome assertions. Though Olson says that "insights and questions spawned by the Christian faith can be welcomed in all discussions and forums," he later obliterates the epistemological grounds for a Christian voice in such conversations. In an unhelpful—but not unusual—interpretation of the two kingdoms teaching, he cedes all genuine epistemological claims to secular "knowledge of people and the world in which we live." This suggests that the academic life of an ELCA college is totally in the left hand kingdom and therefore not open to the insights and claims of faith. Olson takes away in his theological statements what he affirms in his earlier pedagogical ones.

While I agree that there is no such thing as a Lutheran biology or Lutheran economics, the Christian faith (Lutheranly construed) certainly ought to have insights and claims that can enter the conversation at the biological and economic tables. There is a Christian intellectual tradition that makes claims about human nature and action. Those claims ought to be given voice in a church-related college; they are unlikely to be taken seriously in a public college. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr's explication of the biblical/Christian view of the nature and destiny of humankind is a profound reading of human nature that can and should enter discussions in psychology, sociology, economics, or any of the other social sciences and humanities. Christianity has a view of human nature that can offer wise insight in every conversation. Niebuhr's writings are in fact a debate with views of human nature that dominated the thought of the time.

The problem in Olson's understanding of the two kingdoms doctrine is that he narrowly limits the Gospel to the proclamation of justification. Rather, the Gospel has to be

taken as the whole Trinitarian faith which includes many magnificent Christian insights into the whole of human existence. That whole vision (the Right Hand Kingdom) then engages the secular insights and claims of the Left Hand Kingdom, much in the way that Muilenberg describes in his "Welcome Strangers." Ceding all intellectual input to secular sources in the Left Hand Kingdom is a disaster for Christians who want to be thinking Christians. Such an interpretation of the Two Kingdoms will aid in the secularization of church-related colleges, as it has in the past.

I also welcome President Tipson's long and serious grappling with the book *The Future of Religious Colleges: The Proceedings of the Harvard Conference on the Future of Religious Colleges*, as well as his more general engagement with my work, part of which I have had a chance to share at Wittenberg. His description and analysis of the book are exemplary. Then, however, he reflects on issues that continue to occupy his concerns. I would like to respond to his reflections.

First, Tipson suggests that I believe that "more is better" regarding the institutional church's control of its colleges. I really don't believe that. Rather, I believe that the college itself has to commit itself to a lively relation to the vision and ethos of its sponsoring tradition, which will obviously mean the recruitment of people who know the vision and embody the ethos. It is much more impressive when colleges do that on their own and for their own intrinsic reasons than when colleges submit to more church control, which isn't very likely anyway. I, for one, was happy that Roanoke was an independent Lutheran college when St. Olaf College's nominations for board membership had to be submitted to the ELCA churchwide assembly, where a coterie of activists kept raising questions about the nominees. More formal control is not something I promote, assuming of course, that there is decent representation for the church on the college's board.

However, I do think "more is better" with regard to the college making the vision and ethos of its parent tradition more publicly relevant to its own academic and social life. One could perhaps reach a saturation point where the

tradition's contributions became suffocating or oppressive, but such is not the problem at our ELCA colleges. Many have so marginalized the presence of Christian intellectual and moral claims that little is left. In such a situation I think "more is better," with the proviso that that "more" be well done and intellectually persuasive.

Later on he seems to take me a bit to task for suggesting that it is important that at least two or three Lutheran colleges maintain a robust—or what I call a "critical mass"—relation to their Lutheran heritage. Well, if you grant (and I'm not sure that Tipson would grant this) that a sponsoring Christian tradition—its vision, ethos, and the persons who bear them—might in principle have a noticeable and positive effect on a cooperating college or university, then it would behoove us to have at least a handful that are recognizably Lutheran. We will have many Wittenbergs and Roanokes who assure a certain kind of Lutheran/Christian voice and presence in their educational enterprises. I, like, Tipson, find these kinds of colleges attractive and worthy of the name "church-related colleges." But I also believe that several more pervasively Lutheran colleges of quality will indeed "represent a gain for the church and for higher education."

Tipson also raises the question of rather we protest too much against the secularization process. There were great gains in that process, he argues and I would agree. He asks whether anyone in his or her right mind would suggest that the USA would be better off "if Harvard had remained committed to its Puritan roots." When we denounce the secularization process Tipson thinks we are at the same time "overstating the gains and minimizing the deficits of education at religious colleges." These are good points. We do not want to go back to some golden age where the engagement of faith and reason were presumably done right. In most cases there wasn't such a time.

But I would hazard the opinion that Harvard would be better off if it hadn't completely jettisoned its Christian heritage. If Harvard's enlightenment would not have been so militant and its Christians so inept perhaps the university could have more soul with its current quality. I can envision a Harvard that actually might have been better. There is some wisdom in William Buckley's dictum that he would rather be governed by the first hundred persons in the Boston telephone directory than by the Harvard faculty. A bit more soul may have mitigated some of the elitist arrogance of that university.

President Tipson shies away from the more "robust"

relation of a college to its Christian heritage that many of us commend. He worries about too much religious intensity. He likes the rigor, critical capacities, and objectivity of Enlightenment models of education that might be threatened by stronger role for Christian intellectual claims. He thinks a Baylor and especially a Calvin are as much to be shunned as models of higher education as Ohio State.

I detect here a rather unchastened Enlightenment spirit. True, like Tipson, I do not want to reject some of the important gifts of the Enlightenment—a commitment to reasonable criteria for scholarship and research, an effort at objective inquiry, and a devotion to excellence in following those criteria and efforts. The Enlightenment project has offered the world a great gain in knowledge. But in recent days it has become clear that it has unwisely rejected other ways of knowing and has overestimated its transcendence over historical traditions. Indeed, it is a limited tradition with a history of its own, in spite of its claims to universality. It smuggles into its methods and claims many philosophical and religious assumptions that are not fully justified; those assumptions are often based on a faith of its own. For example, if a church follows biblical studies based solely on the historical critical method that church will soon find its convictions about the Incarnation and Resurrection severely undermined. That does not mean we should not use the historical critical method; it simply means that we recognize its dangers and limitations.

We should not be supine before the claims of the social sciences and humanities. Their methods and claims are loaded with philosophical and religious assumptions. John Milbank characterizes the grand social sciences as "anti-theologies," explicitly offered as world hypotheses radically different than the Christian. Again, we do not want to construct Christian social sciences but we do want to critique the current versions, and discern which are more or less compatible with Christian claims. At the very least, we want to engage them from a Christian perspective.

Lutherans have been charged with being quietist toward the political world on account of their flawed interpretations of the two kingdoms. Those flawed interpretations can operate in the educational sphere so that Lutherans—and many other Christians—simply accept the secular claims of the day as sacrosanct. That is nonsense. An alert Lutheran college should engage in mutual critique between the claims of faith (which are intellectual) and the claims of secular approaches to college. Respect for the accomplishments of the Enlightenment, yes!; uncritical acceptance, no!

Not every faculty member need do such engagement, but on the whole the Lutheran college should recruit a significant number of faculty who are interested in and support it. Further, not every class or course need be characterized by such engagement. Indeed, too much would prevent the educator from getting at the recognized knowledge of the field. But there are many opportunities for the secular claims to dialogue with Christian claims. Students wonder about questions that are conducive to such a dialogue. The methodological foundations of almost every intellectual endeavor need to be scrutinized critically, and Christian claims can be a part of that process. For example, texts in business ethics often operate without religious perspectives. But many business people are serious religious people who want their faith to be relevant to their life in the world. A business ethics course in a Lutheran college ought to incorporate those religious perspectives. Rather than asking for a privilege for religious perspectives, as Tipson suggests, I'm asking for the inclusion of such. And it would seem reasonable to include that sort of perspective in many

areas of inquiry. That would indicate to students and parents alike that their faith is being taken seriously, not that it is being privileged.

I want to end on a point of agreement. Tipson laments the lack of interest in and support for the colleges and universities by the parent churches themselves. I couldn't agree more, though I am aware—as is Tipson—of how important the indirect support from wealthy Lutheran donors remains for our schools. But the bishops and pastors of the church will have to get serious about our schools, for if they are not serious it is unlikely that the schools themselves will indefinitely remain connected to their religious heritage.

Finally, I think it just great that so many Presidents of our Lutheran schools are thoughtfully grappling with these important questions. They are too important to be left to the church.

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